



Clear Thoughts – the Mental Health in Learning Disability Knowledge Centre

People who have a learning disability are more likely than the general population to have mental health problems (FPLD 2002 Emerson and Hutton 2007) and the mental health needs of these people are often not recognised and subject to 'diagnostic overshadowing' (DRC 2006).

Many family members and front line supporters are unaware of the steps they can take to promote positive mental health for people who have a learning disability and what to do when they have concerns about an individual.

The Association for Real Change, ARC (www.arcuk.org.uk) are undertaking a three year project, funded by the Dept of Health, to develop a 'knowledge centre' providing information regarding mental health in learning disability. The centre will provide information for individuals themselves, their families and front line staff. This is the 'Clear Thoughts' project (www.clearthoughts.info).

Clear Thoughts will primarily be a web-based resource, it seeks not to re-invent any wheels but will point interested parties to existing resources (many of which are excellent but not always easy to find for those less proficient in using the internet) where relevant.

The Clear Thoughts website will have passive resources - sharing best practice, offering information, links to relevant organisations and resources and will provide individuals and families with details of what they should expect from services. It will also have an active aspect - becoming a virtual community and email forum.

It will be a single site that will develop over time, however the project worker will also become aware of future direction, useful contacts and local and national resources enabling support for interested parties via telephone. The aim is to present information in an accessible style and as simple a format as possible, attempting to ensure ease of access.

The website is 'endorsed' by various organisations and their logo's included on the front page, hopefully increasing confidence in the information given when people log-in.

The focus of the website will be promoting positive mental health, including the positive roles diet (Sustain/Mental Health Foundation 2006) and exercise (Mental Health Foundation 2005). The Clear Thoughts website will direct people to the services, both voluntary and statutory, locally that may be able to assist them.

The essential issues regarding people with a learning disability and their emotional well-being are often not fully recognised. Communication needs, especially non-verbal communication such as 'challenging behaviour', physical health needs, including sensory impairments and self-harm all need to be considered by the Clear Thoughts project as do ethnicity, stigma and labelling.

Agreement about the language used on the website needs to be reached and the project worker will seek views on the 'correct' terms to use on the website. Some people may refer emotional well-being over positive mental health or emotional distress over mental ill-health for example. The terms used will have to be discussed and agreed with families and individuals. It may be more sensitive to use the term emotional distress for example but it is not useful if people do not understand the term. A questionnaire about the proposed images for the project has also been sent out.

On a positive note many of the skills, abilities and ways of working that exist in learning disability services are well suited to promoting positive mental health, for example holistic principles, person-centred planning, and use of advocacy. In many cases people will already be doing the things highlighted as good practice, therefore offering positive messages to those using the site.

Another recent project undertaken by ARC - CAMHS and New Directions in Learning Disability and Ethnicity – the Candle resource is available to download for free from the Clear Thoughts website. The resource offers front line staff information, case studies, good practice examples, exercises and handouts about young people, ethnicity, mental health and learning disability.

For more information or if you have any examples of good practice you wish to share with the 'Clear Thoughts' project please feel free to send these to the project worker david.grundy@arcuk.org.uk or have a look at the website by logging onto the website at www.clearthoughts.info

ARC is a national charity which supports providers of learning disability services. It offers a range of services to its members such as CRB checks and training opportunities as well as a number of publications and sources of information. For more information about ARC and to see the range of projects it is developing log onto the Association for Real Change website www.arcuk.org.uk.

